



Two-Way Street

By LCdr. Dick Vitali

I was the tactical coordinator (TACCO) on a routine training mission out of Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. Our crew just had completed the simulator portion of the advanced-readiness program, and we were on our third of six scheduled flights. After takeoff, we checked on-station southeast of Waikiki and had flight following from Honolulu Approach.

ATC communications were extremely busy as we got vectors, while descending below the cloud layer to get eyes on our briefed target deck. The flight station continuously scanned in and out of the cockpit to manage the tactical mission, while they looked for civilian airliners on final approach into Honolulu International Airport. The VHF radio was intermittent, so the flight station turned off the squelch. They also switched up the UHF-1 companion frequency for flight advisories.

As we set up for our first pass on the target deck, the in-flight technician (IFT) came to my station and

explained that it smelled like something was burning in the aft part of the aircraft. I then asked the flight station to execute the fire-of-unknown-origin checklist. **The radios were clobbered**, and the flight station did not acknowledge my request, so I again asked them to execute the fire bill.

Hearing no response, I quickly went to the sensor 2 station in the middle of the aircraft and continued with the fire bill in accordance with the checklist. As I grabbed the PA microphone, crew members began to call their stations clear of any smoke or fumes. I also did an ICS check with the cockpit. I even put on the acoustic-operator headset but was distracted by the constant chatter over the radios that preoccupied the flight station.

Fortunately, the qualified off-duty flight engineer had relocated to the flight station from the aft cabin. His appearance cued the pilots that an abnormal condition existed. In response to the pilots' puzzled gaze, the



FE replied, “Are you aware there are fumes in the tube, and they have out the fire bottles?”

I once again called to the flight station on ICS, and they responded to this communication check with, “Are we activating the fire bill?”

I told them the fumes were isolated to the acoustic station, and all the circuit breakers had been pulled. We removed the portable oxygen bottles from the area. Although the fumes were dissipating, we continued to smell them. We believed the source of the fumes to be the sensor 2 programmable-entry-panel (PEP) power supply or the PEP itself.

As people at the flight station ran the fire-of-unknown-origin checklist, they asked if they should secure Bus A. I replied “no,” as we had secured power to the source of the fumes and did not want to further degrade the situation. That response triggered the pilots to declare an emergency; they set up to divert to Barbers Point airfield, visible only 10 miles away. I ran to the flight station to confirm we were diverting, and we agreed it would be better to troubleshoot on deck than in the midst of highly congested airspace. We landed at Barbers Point and executed the emergency ground egress.

We met the fire marshal and explained that what appeared to be a missile on the right wing was only a Maverick CATM used for training. We then installed the safety pins on the CATM and wing rack. I escorted the firefighters on board the aircraft and explained which components we believed were the source of fumes. The in-flight technicians removed both the sensor 2 display and PEP and determined the latter had

smoke-checked itself.

This was my first fire of unknown origin in the aircraft, and I’m sure it won’t be the last. Communication is vital throughout all phases of flight, especially during unbriefed emergency situations. Most importantly, communication is a two-way street.

Without feedback, though,
you might as well be
talking to a
brick wall.

In this case, I conveyed information to the flight station but [did not wait to receive their acknowledgment](#). Feedback can be over ICS, via a head nod, or even a wing rock from your wingman, but it is essential to complete any exchange of information.

External communications also played a critical role during this emergency and actually imposed a barrier to the exchange of information between crew members. Both pilots were backing up each other in a busy environment, and they lost situational awareness on communications internal to the aircraft. In hindsight, I should have stopped at the flight station on my way back to the middle of the cabin to run the emergency checklist.

Once we were all on the same page, the emergency procedures went efficiently and smoothly, inside and outside of the aircraft. We just needed a few minutes to get in the groove. If an emergency exists, either in a single seat or multi-place aircraft, we must convey our situation and information to sources external and internal to the aircraft. More importantly, the communication interstate doesn’t stop there—you need to make sure you get feedback from those sources. 🦅

LCdr. Dick Vitali flies with VP-4.